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AUTHOR Boomer, Lyman W.
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ABSTRACT

A definition for the term "paraprofessional" is proposed, and the role of paraprofessionals in programs for handicapped learners is examined. It is reported that the special education paraprofessional assists in the development of the instructional program and shares in the responsibility for effective classroom management, while the special education teacher is primarily responsible for defining and directing the instructional program and teaching the children, as well as acting as program manager and supervisor. (SBH)

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THE PARAPROFESSIONAL IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Lyman W. Boomer, Ed.D.
Associate Professor and Coordinator
Special Education Program
Fort Hays State University
Hays, Kansas

EC101817

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THE PARAPROFESSIONAL IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Introduction

With the passage of P.L. 94-142: "Education of All Handicapped Children Act" (1975), every child regardless of his handicapping condition or geographic location is guaranteed the right to a free appropriate public education. As a result, the number of children who require specialized education services will increase greatly, and the education programs must become broader and more varied to meet the individual needs of handicapped children (National Advisory Committee on the Handicapped, 1976). In turn, differential staffing including the use of special education paraprofessionals becomes an immediate concern (New Careers Training Laboratory, 1974). The purpose of this study is to propose a definition and to examine the role of paraprofessionals in programs for handicapped learners.

Definition of "Paraprofessional"

The paraprofessional is one who works under the direction of the special education teacher, and helps to provide a wider range of educational opportunities for handicapped children. The special education paraprofessional is more than a "teacher's aide"; that is, one whose duties are solely clerical or administrative. Furthermore, the special education paraprofessional is more than a "children's aide", that is, one whose duties are limited to child care. The special education paraprofessional is a member of an instructional team and is directly involved with teaching children.

The role of the special education paraprofessional might be compared to that of the dental hygienst who is a member of a professional treatment team, and is directly involved with providing dental care. In both cases, the para-

professional and dental hygienst work alongside the professional and help to provide a wider range of specialized services to persons in need.

Role of the Paraprofessional

The role of the special education paraprofessional must be examined in relation to the teacher, children, and the instructional program:

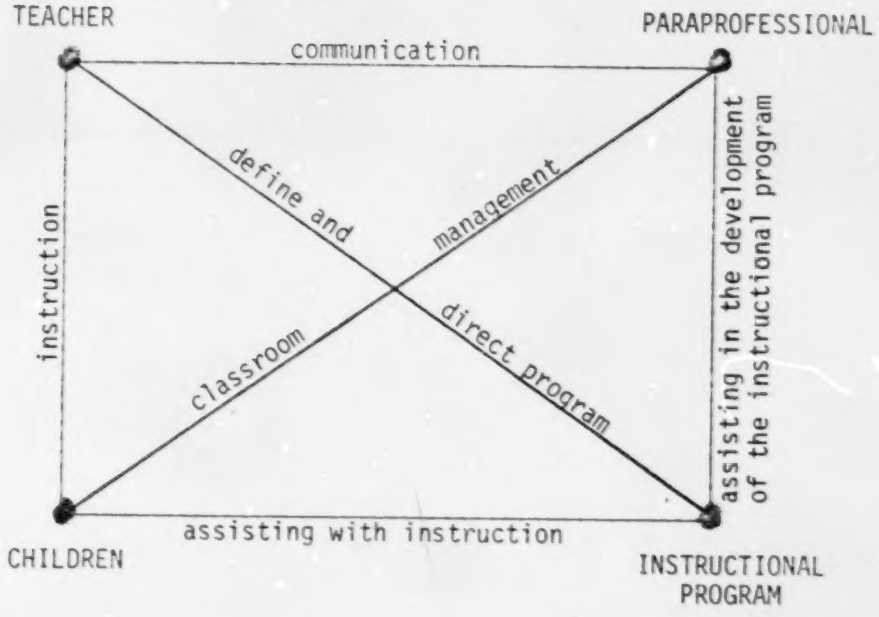

FIGURE 1: Role of the paraprofessional.

Communication. Communication is essential if the special education teacher and paraprofessional are to establish an effective instructional team which meets the individual needs of handicapped learners. Communication includes orientation during pre-planning days before the start of the school year, regularly scheduled meetings, and "on-the-spot" communication.

In order to develop a team approach to program planning, the special education teacher and paraprofessional should meet during the pre-planning days before the beginning of the school year. The paraprofessional should be introduced to the teachers, administrators, and other staff, and should be oriented to the school. The teacher should learn the paraprofessional's hobbies, interests, and previous experience with children. For example, if the paraprofessional has skills in sewing or woodworking, these skills can be incorporated in the instructional program. If the paraprofessional has had experience with Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, 4-H, or church youth groups, these experiences may provide a wider range of learning opportunities for handicapped children.

The teacher and paraprofessional should meet at least weekly to review the week's activities and to plan for the coming week. If the teacher has decided to have the class visit the dairy farm, the paraprofessional can be very helpful in planning for the visit. For example, the paraprofessional can obtain parent permission slips from the office, draft a letter to be sent home, arrange for the transportation, and make sure that each child has enough money for a treat. Thus, by meeting regularly, the paraprofessional can become an integral part of the program planning and implimentation.

In order to meet the daily challenge of handicapped learners, the teacher and paraprofessional must be ready to communicate quickly and effectively. Such communication may include a rapid change of plans because a child has become upset, or quick reaction to an emergency situation on the playground, lunchroom,

etc. Constant communication is essential to building a program which is responsive to handicapped learners.

Assisting in the development of the instructional program. While the teacher is primarily responsible for defining and directing the instructional program, the paraprofessional can assist by preparing materials, making photocopies, typing and grading tests, creating bulletin boards, and obtaining materials from the Instructional Materials Center. The paraprofessional's ability to assist in the development of the instructional program may depend in large part upon the ability of the teacher and paraprofessional to develop effective lines of communication, and the teacher's ability as a program manager.

Assisting with instruction. The teacher must be responsible for initially teaching a concept to a child. However, after concept has been initially presented, the paraprofessional can reinforce that concept through learning games, practice exercises, and small group activities. While the teacher teaches an individual child or a small group of children, the paraprofessional can supervise a larger group of children at various learning activities. Such an approach avoids the "divide and conquer syndrome"; that is, dividing the children equally between the teacher and paraprofessional and switching when one or the other becomes frustrated or ineffective. If the teacher and paraprofessional take time to plan and to maintain open lines of communication, the individual learning needs of handicapped children can be more fully met.

The purpose of the paraprofessional is to create a more effective and efficient learning environment for handicapped children. This can be accomplished by providing the teacher with more time with children who display more severe learning and behavioral problems. A common error is to put the paraprofessional with the most difficult child almost exclusively. In this case, the teacher is deprived an opportunity to teach, and the child is deprived of an opportunity

to learn. The special education teacher is trained to conduct an educational diagnosis, develop an intervention, and assess the effectiveness of that intervention. Through careful program planning and constant communication, the paraprofessional can provide the teacher with more time to work with each individual child.

Classroom management. The paraprofessional can develop skills in classroom management through pre-service training, application of skills in the classroom, and regular supervision by the classroom teacher. Pre-service training might include classes or workshops on behavioral analysis and the systematic application of consequences (New Careers Training Laboratory, 1974). These skills can then be applied immediately in classroom under the direction of the teacher.

Both the teacher and the paraprofessional must share the responsibility for effective classroom management. If it is a classroom for emotionally disturbed children, the teacher may wish to develop a well-structured classroom environment (Gallagher, 1970; Whelan & Haring, 1966). Together then the teacher and paraprofessional can develop learning and activity centers, establish classroom rules, select an array of reinforcers, and develop individual program schedules, among other things. Together they insure that the classroom is a productive place in which children can learn.

Discussion

The paraprofessional in special education assists in the development of the instructional program, assists with instruction, and shares in the responsibility for effective classroom management. The teacher is primarily responsible for defining and directing the instructional program and for teaching the children. In addition, as a member of an instructional team, the teacher is a program manager and supervisor. In order for the instructional program to be fully responsive to the needs of handicapped learners, the role of both teacher and paraprofessional must be carefully defined.

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